

# Limitations of Ethical Reasoning as an Action (Praxis) Strategy

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**ABSTRACT.** For both philosophers and managers, reasoning with ourselves and others can be used both as (1) a way of knowing what is ethical and (2) a way of acting to help ourselves, others and organizations behave ethically. However, for many of us, knowing is frequently not the same as acting. Four areas are addressed: (1) thirteen limitations of ethical reasoning as an action strategy; (2) how a better understanding of these limitations can strengthen ethical reasoning as an action strategy; (3) how an understanding of these limitations can serve as a conceptual foundation for exploring other ethical action strategies; and, (4) implications for experiential learning and teaching.

## Introduction

What is common to much of the work referred to as ethical philosophy in general, as well as managerial ethics in particular, is a dependence on reason and reasoning (Gewirth, 1978; Hare, 1963; Parfit, 1984). An underlying presupposition for many ethical philosophers is that to reason is to be ethical, to be unethical is to reason inadequately. Williams (1985, p. 29) explains:

... it might turn out that when we properly think about it, we shall find that we are committed to an ethical life, merely because we are rational agents. Some philosophers believe that this is true. If they are right, then there is what I have called an Archimedean point: something to

which even the amoralist or the skeptic is committed but which, properly thought through, will show us that he is irrational, or unreasonable, or at any rate mistaken.

For both philosophers and managers, reasoning with ourselves and others can be used both as (1) a way of knowing (epistemology) what is ethical and (2) a way of acting (praxis) to help ourselves, others and organizations behave ethically. However, for many of us, knowing is frequently not the same as acting. The prime focus here is that there are severe limitations with reasoning as an effective way of acting with others when our objective is to influence or change ethical and unethical organizational behaviors. Thirteen limitations are explored. Cases are also considered throughout the exploration.

However, among the implications discussed is the point that a better understanding of the limitations of ethical reasoning as an action strategy can actually strengthen ethical reasoning as an action strategy. Further, an understanding of the limitations of ethical reasoning can also serve as a foundation for exploring other ethical action strategies such as secretly blowing the whistle, publicly blowing the whistle, secretly threatening to blow the whistle, sabotage, quietly not implementing, conscientiously objecting, exiting, problem solving negotiating, and cooperative transformation. In addition, important teaching implications are also addressed.

The ethical reasoning model is different than the modern economics model. In an economic model, ends (in our case, ethical behaviors) would for the most part not be considered or would be assumed away as either emotive or arational. Instead, reasoning is used to consider and choose among more and less efficient and effective economic action alternatives for achieving the arational or emotive ends, for example, of consumers.

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The focus here is not on the question of whether it is possible or desirable to use reasoning for knowing ethical ends. As in an economics model, this article considers the efficiency utility of a particular alternative (ethical reasoning) for achieving an end (ethical organization behavior). In a sense, this may be even a more radical critique of ethical reasoning as a limited and often ineffective action means (different than knowing means) than that of the economist's hesitation concerning reasoning about the ends of consumer preferences.

The scholarship in the area of ethics is also quite different than in more general economics, management and administration. For example, in Kenneth Bond's (1985) bibliography of articles concerning administrative, managerial, business and public administration ethics, there are 1343 articles listed from predominantly academic journals. The vast majority of these articles focus on the question of "What is ethical and unethical in management?" With the exception of a relatively small but rapidly growing whistle blowing literature, very few articles focus on the question of what alternative means managers can efficiently and effectively act in order to achieve what they understand to be ethical ends. The same is true for the leading textbooks in the field (Ackerman and Bauer, 1976; Beauchamp and Bowie, 1983; Bowie, 1982; De George, 1986, 1978; Donaldson, 1982; Donaldson and Werhane, 1983; Hoffman and Moore, 1984; Velasquez, 1982).

After one has made a judgement through ethical reasoning and other processes about what is ethical and unethical, reasoning also can be used as an action implementation strategy for helping ourselves, others and organizations behave ethically and not behave unethically. That is, after reasoning helps us understand what is ethical, reasoning can also serve as a strategic behavior for helping others and the organization to act ethically. Acting to solve an ethical problem is related to but different than understanding what is ethical or unethical. The unit of analysis of acting effectively to influence or change ethical or unethical organization behavior is not always the same as the unit of analysis of understanding ethical truths about ethical issues.

Implicitly within practice, this is not new for many practicing professionals. In academic daily life relative to written scholarship, it is not even a new phenomenon for many professors who understand

the limitations of ethical reasoning in, for example, dealing with unethical behaviors of university administrators and, perhaps especially, ourselves and our professorial colleagues. For example, how often are we able to change through ethical reasoning, the unethical behavior of a colleague (or ourselves) in our own department on issues such as inadequate student advising, not keeping enough office hours, misappropriation or misrepresentation of research funds, travel expenses, inadequate class preparation, inadequate grading, inadequate preparation for meetings, sexist behavior, research deception/exaggeration, etc.? How often do we even try to turn such behaviors around with ethical reasoning? Why is it that ethical reasoning may be more effective for understanding ethical problems than as an action approach for turning around unethical organization behavior? Limitations of ethical reasoning as a strategy for ethical acting (praxis) are discussed within the contexts of several cases.

### **Limitations of ethical reasoning as an action (praxis) strategy**

The limitations considered are as follows. They are first listed and then each is discussed.

1. Since rights of citizenship, e.g., free speech, are limited within many organizations, then ethical reasoning as an action strategy is limited.
2. Bounded rationality and uncertainty/complexity can limit ethical reasoning.
3. Since some people, perhaps even some organizational subcultures, can base ethical judgments on "wrong" authority more than on ethical reasoning, reasoning as an action strategy can be limited.
4. Some people, perhaps most people, base ethical judgments on past personal and often inarticulated experiences more than on ethical reasoning.
5. Congenital handicaps and/or developed mental illnesses can limit the effectiveness of ethical reasoning.
6. Time pressures may not permit the time needed to do ethical reasoning.
7. Higher level managers can sincerely not understand ethical failures of hierarchy (themselves) relative to lower level employees.
8. Lower level managers can sincerely believe that

they can't trust upper level managers to be sympathetic to ethical reasoning.

9. Cross-cultural value/philosophy differences can limit the common ground needed for ethical reasoning.

10. If for some people, ethics is not very analytic or cognitive, then ethical reasoning can be limited.

11. If for some people, ethics is more of an intuitive and/or mystical process, then ethical reasoning can be limited.

12. If it is difficult or impossible to reason from "is" to "ought", then it may be difficult or impossible to ethically reason from an "is" to an "ethical action ought".

13. Managers can understand and know through ethical reasoning, but nonetheless choose not to practice the ethical.

1. Since rights of citizenship, e.g., free speech, are limited within many organizations, then ethical reasoning as an action strategy is limited. Most organizations do not permit managers and employees nearly the same amount of rights that citizens of democracies such as the United States or Japan have (Lindblom, 1976). As Robert E. Wood, former CEO of the giant retailer, Sears, Roebuck, has observed (Ewing, 1977, p. 21):

We stress the advantages of the free enterprise system, we complain about the totalitarian state, but in our individual organizations we have created more or less a totalitarian system in industry, particularly in large industry.

Employees in many organizations are still a long way from having rights as citizens of organizations although the responsibilities of citizenship may still be present. Of particular importance is the right of free speech. Many organizations do not give managers and other employees the right to free speech. If managers are not able to speak freely, it can be very difficult to reason with other managers and employees about what is or is not ethical and what should or should not be done about unethical behavior.

2. Bounded rationality and uncertainty/complexity can limit ethical reasoning. Some ethical issues are very complex and uncertain. Not all of us have the training or the ability to understand and reason well about very complex issues (Simon, 1983). For

example, in the case of Geary — U.S. Steel, the technical and scientific issues involved with the unsafe deep oil well casings were very complicated and beyond the understanding of some of the managers involved, particularly some of the non-technically educated sales, product promotion and financial managers. With managers that do not have the ability to understand the technical issues, ethical reasoning about technical points can be limited. Also, it is not unusual that a more informed person is able to "out argue" a lesser informed person while still being ethically wrong.

3. Since some people, perhaps even some organizational subcultures, can base ethical judgments on "wrong" authority more than on ethical reasoning, then reasoning as an action strategy can be limited. As Toulmin's (1961) *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics*, Baier's (1958) *The Moral Point of View*, Kupperman's (1970) *Ethical Knowledge*, and Gauthier's (1986) *Morals by Agreement* recognize, some people use authority more than ethical reasoning in arriving at ethical judgments. At an extreme is the case of Eichmann. From Arendt (1963, 1964, 1978) we learn that Eichmann was an upper middle level manager in a Nazi institution engaged in, as Arendt phrased it, the "administrative massacre" of millions of people. Eichmann never belonged to the higher Party circles. He managed in an institutional environment where obeying authority was valued, expected and required. According to Arendt, Eichmann believed that he was practicing the virtue of obedience when he was aiding his institution. Hitler ordered Goering, Goering ordered Himmler, Himmler ordered Heydrich, Heydrich ordered Eichmann, and Eichmann obeyed authority. Arendt (1964, p. 247) explained what she thinks Eichmann thought. "His guilt came from his obedience, and obedience is praised as a virtue. His virtue has been abused by the Nazi leaders. But he was not one of the ruling clique, he was a victim, and only the leaders deserved punishment."

4. Some people, perhaps most people, base ethical judgments on past personal and often inarticulated experiences more than on ethical reasoning. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books Two and Six, Aristotle argues that not all of us have grown up in the type of environments we need in order to: (a) develop the abilities required to reason concerning ethical information and issues; and, (b) develop an understanding

of the desirability of reasoning about ethical issues. That is, for many of us, the environments and experiences we have grown up in and with prevent or make it very difficult for us to understand ethical reasoning or to be able to reason with others about what is ethical, at least in the short term. For example, Tom McCann (1978, 1984), in reflecting back on his experiences with United Fruit in overthrowing the government of Guatemala observed that "At the time, I identified so closely with the company and my job that I didn't think about it as a moral or ethical issue". It would appear at least possible that there was something about the experiences, corporate culture and environment of United Fruit that did not lend itself to a thoroughly reasoned exploration of the ethical and perhaps even strategic issues involved with killing hundreds of people and overthrowing a democratically elected, somewhat left of center, government of Guatemala for the sake of larger or safer banana profits and fear of the Soviet Union's expansion of influence. Could such environmental deprivation at the time make it difficult to reason with Tom McCann, the manager, not to facilitate the overthrow of a government, very large bribes, imprisonments, tortures, and killings?

5. Congenital handicaps and/or developed mental illnesses can limit the effectiveness of ethical reasoning. Is it possible that some managers and employees of organizations can be born with or develop mental illnesses or character disorders such as a psychopath (aggressive anti-social behavior), sociopath (no or little conscience), or more simply physiological disorders that prevent them from understanding and positively responding to ethical reasoning? To the extent that this is true and some key colleagues or players are so afflicted, then reasoning as an ethical action strategy for the average person, who has not received special clinical training, may be limited.

6. Time pressures may not permit the time needed to do ethical reasoning. The need to make decisions in a short time can greatly limit the effectiveness of ethical reasoning as an action strategy. For example, in the Errol Marshall and Hydraulic Parts and Components, Inc. case (Pound, 1985), Errol Marshall helped negotiate the sale of a subcontract to sell heavy equipment to the U.S. Navy while giving \$70,000 in kickbacks to two materials managers of Brown & Root Inc., the project's prime

contractor. According to Mr. Marshall, the prime contractor "demanded the kickbacks. . . . It was cut and dried. We would not get the business otherwise" (Pound, 1985, p. 25). Marshall thought that if he didn't pay the bribe very soon after it was asked, the subcontract would be given to a different company. Marshall did not think that there was time for reasoning about ethics or any other factors. As he said, "It was cut and dried. We would not get the business otherwise." As Shakespeare's Hamlet observes and which may be applicable here:

. . . the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pit and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.

7. Higher level managers can sincerely not understand ethical failures of hierarchy (themselves) relative to lower level employees. Upper level managers are often surprised when a lower level employee chooses to blow the whistle before reasoning with them about a problem. It is sometimes easier to understand that another person is acting unethically than to understand that we are acting unethically ourselves. It may be a bit like driving through a yellow traffic light at a high speed. While we do, in a sense, reason about the dangers, e.g., we reason that the statistical probability is low that we will hit another car and we hope that there will be no accident, we may nonetheless be acting both an illegal and unethical behavior by risking the lives of other people. Sometimes, there is a tendency to reason about and judge ourselves based on our intentions and to reason about and judge others based on their behaviors. People who drive through yellow or red traffic lights and, for example, perhaps Wallace of U.S. Steel, after what they consider thorough ethical reasoning sincerely believe that there are no ethical problems with what they intended. If we intend and hope that there is no problem, then there may not be much openness to contrary ethical reasoning.

8. Lower level managers can sincerely believe that they can't trust upper level managers to be sympathetic to ethical reasoning. Some employees and managers believe that, even if they wanted to, one just doesn't discuss and reason about religion, politics and ethics in the work environment. For some,

there is a belief that these matters are for the private life or the public political life, but not the public work life. For example, some upper level managers are proud of saying that they don't care what people believe in as long as they do their work and do what they are told. In so saying, they believe they are being tolerant of people's personal beliefs. However, they may not understand that they can also be interpreted as discouraging ethical reasoning and inquiry at work. If the lower level manager doesn't think that an upper level manager cares about or is interested in discussing and reasoning about ethical issues, the role of reasoning as an action strategy is limited.

9. Cross-cultural value/philosophy differences can limit the common ground needed for ethical reasoning. Mr. Bert Mendelsohn was Director of Marketing, Consumer Products Division (PROCON), General Electric Mexico in 1962 (Mendelsohn, 1986). Shortly after several GE managers were convicted and sent to jail for price fixing in the United States, Mr. Mendelsohn, along with all other GE U.S. and international personnel, received a letter from the New York Board Chairman of GE specifically instructing all GE personnel not to do or participate in any price fixing or collusion "of any kind, direct or implied" between GE personnel and any of its competitors. His boss in Mexico first suggested and then ordered Mr. Mendelsohn to continue to participate in collusive biweekly meetings in the Restaurant San Angel Inn in Mexico City concerning prices, terms, production schedules, etc. with competitors (Westinghouse, Philips, Sylvania) because that is the way business was done in Mexico. Mr. Mendelsohn, a U.S. citizen, reasoned with his boss that since he had received a direct personal letter from the CEO not to collude, then he should not collude, and he therefore chose not to attend the price fixing meetings. Another employee was sent instead. Business continued as usual. Mr. Mendelsohn thinks that this reasoned decision on his part, to ethically obey the order from New York and not to obey the order from Mexico, essentially ended his opportunities for advancement in Mexico and in GE. According to Mr. Mendelsohn, "My future with GE was irrevocably damaged by my refusal to participate in the competitive collusion and, within ten months of the confrontation with my then boss, I was terminated." Mr. Mendelsohn's effort to reason with his Mexican superior on the necessity of obeying

one's Board Chairman on this ethical issue was superceded, in effect, by "When in Mexico, do as the Mexicans do".

10. If for some people, ethics is not very analytic or cognitive, then ethical reasoning can be limited. Some analytic philosophers (in a way similar to the modern economic model) have made a criticism of the relevance and utility of reason in ethics. For example, Ayer (1936, 1982) in his *Language, Truth and Logic* and in his *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* and Stevenson (1960) in his *Ethics and Language* make the point that the field of ethics is much more "emotive" (emotions, feelings) than it is logically reasoned or empirically verifiable. To the extent that there is validity in this perspective, and for those managers who are much more "emotive", e.g., relying on their "gut" feelings than on reasoning when it comes to ethics, then reasoning as an action strategy by itself is further limited.

11. If for some people, ethics is more of an intuitive and/or mystical process, then ethical reasoning can be limited. Bertrand Russell (1918, p. 16) in his *Mysticism and Logic* asks the questions: "Are there two ways of knowing, which may be called respectively reason and intuition? and if so, is either to be preferred to the other?" His answer is that ". . . while fully developed mysticism seems to me mistaken, I yet believe that, by sufficient restraint, there is an element of wisdom to be learned from the mystical way . . . which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner." Much earlier and before Socrates, Pythagoras (Guthrie, 1919; Cheney, 1945), the founder of mathematics and perhaps the first university (Crotona), who also coined the word *Philosophia* (friends of wisdom), recognized both the reasoning and intuitive/mystical ways of knowing, and, like Aristotle and long before Russell, viewed them more as complementary than as antagonistic. This position, usually a minority position, can be found in all the major religious philosophies (Cheney, 1945; Happold, 1963). At least for those people who lean much more on the intuitive than reasoning as their way of knowing concerning ethical issues, reasoning may be at least somewhat limited as an action strategy.

12. If it is difficult or impossible to reason from "is" to "ought", then it may be difficult or impossible to ethically reason from "is" to an "ethical action ought". The term "naturalistic fallacy" was intro-

duced by Moore (1903) in his *Principia Ethica*. It was his understanding that it was not possible to deduce “ought” from “is” and that our knowledge of ought comes more from “intellectual intuition” than from reason (Smart, 1984, pp. 22–25). Quine (1960) also argued that it is very difficult to deduce “ought” from “is”, but from a different perspective. It was Quine’s understanding that the languages of “is” and “ought” are what he called “indeterminate”, i.e., they do not translate very precisely. If translation is indeterminate, then one could not conclude an “ought” from an “is” (Hare, 1952). Also and from a somewhat different perspective but with the same conclusion, Ayer (1946) argued that one can not deduce “ethical ought” from “is” because ethical statements generally are more concerned with emotions, feelings and attitudes than they are with valid or invalid analytic statements. If it is this difficult to reason from “is” to “ethical ought” in the above senses with people such as Moore, Quine and Ayer because of limitations of deductions, indeterminacy and emotivism, then, to the extent that such analytic reasoning is an important part of ethical reasoning, it may be difficult to reason with similarly oriented managers and organizations.

13. Managers can understand and know through reasoning but nonetheless not practice the ethical. I have collected information on over three hundred cases involving managerial ethics. In many of these cases, the managers appear to and say that they have reasoned through and understand what is ethical, what is unethical and what is in the grey area. However, reasoned understanding is often not the key problem. In many cases, managers chose to do, go along with, or ignore the unethical not because they don’t understand, but because they want to avoid the possibility of punishments, to gain rewards for doing or not opposing what they understood is unethical, or because they do not believe that there is anything they can do to be effective in stopping or turning around an unethical behavior. As Mr. Marshall observed about his own behavior, where he fully understood that the kickbacks were unethical, the prime contractor “demanded the kickbacks. . . . It was cut and dried. We would not get the business otherwise” (Pound, 1985, p. 25). Similarly, as the Personnel Manager, Evelyn Grant observed, “There have been cases where people will do something wrong because they think they have no choice. Their

boss tells them to do it and so they do it, knowing it’s wrong. They don’t realize there are ways around the boss.” (Toffler, 1986, p. 159). The “Go along and get along” strategy is not uncommon.

## Implications

The above 13 factors may suggest that reasoning with people as an action strategy for influencing or changing ethical or unethical organization behavior is limited. Why might this matter? It matters for at least four reasons.

First, implicit in the predominance of journal and textbook scholarship in the area of managerial ethics, with the exception of the relatively small but rapidly growing whistle blowing literature, is the idea that reasoning as an approach to understanding what is ethical can be extended as an action approach to effectively reason within organizations to prevent and/or turn around unethical behavior. As indicated above, there are important limitations to this idea that in many cases render it ineffective. It is important for decision choice among action alternatives that managers and scholars understand the effectiveness limitations of an action strategy. This is particularly important for ethical reasoning as an action strategy since it is so often implicitly “recommended” in much of the articles and textbooks in the field.

Second, since reasoning can be an ineffective action strategy and since there is relatively little scholarship focusing on ethics action and implementation alternatives other than ethical reasoning, then perhaps there is an important need to focus research more on other types of ethical action strategies. Examples of other action strategies that can be investigated include such alternatives as: (1) secretly blow the whistle inside the organization; (2) quietly blow the whistle to a responsible higher level manager; (3) secretly threaten the offender with blowing the whistle; (4) secretly threaten a responsible manager with blowing the whistle; (5) publicly threaten a responsible manager with blowing the whistle; (6) sabotage implementation of the unethical organization behavior; (7) quietly not implement an unethical order/policy; (8) publicly blow the whistle inside the organization; (9) conscientiously object/refuse to implement; (10) indicate uncertainty or refusal

to support cover-up if the individual and/or the organization gets caught; (11) secretly blow the whistle outside the organization; (12) publicly blow the whistle outside the organization; (13) exiting/quitting; (14) problem solving negotiating; and, (15) cooperative transformation (Nielsen, 1987).

Third, if we can better understand the limitations of ethical reasoning as an action strategy, then perhaps we can also improve the effectiveness of our ethical reasoning. For example, one of the limitations of ethical reasoning considered above is that some people have a predominance of experiences where unethical organization behavior appeared to be the only "real world" alternative. If we know that such people and situations exist, then we can perhaps modify our ethical reasoning from the relatively more abstract to more concrete, where one would first get to know the person we are going to reason with very well, in order to search for the relatively rare example within that person's experience where it was possible to create a win-win solution that was both ethical and "real world" effective.

Fourth, a speculation. What may be happening in some cases is that managers, in Aristotle's sense, while they have learned and do understand what is unethical in a reasoned and intellectual way, nonetheless have not learned how to practice ethics ("phronesis"). That is, many managers may not have developed applied ethical characters (Aristotle, *N. Ethics*, Book six, chapter five). Many managers may, in Monan's (1968, pp. 112, 155) words, not have developed:

"an experiential intuition, based on, and directed to, individualized human actions" with "the intrinsic dependence of this intuition on moral virtue and praxis, the former as subjective condition for seeing, the latter as context in which alone human value reveals itself . . . ethicists who would appeal exclusively to a view of man's" (reasoning?) "nature in erecting an ethics can only guard against the fallacy of arguing from 'is' to 'ought' by following Aristotle's lead in grasping a morally significant 'nature', not by theoretic speculation, but through affective experience. Clearly, however, in this ebb and flow between normative" (reasoning?) "nature and experience, the primacy belongs in Aristotle's final system, to affective intuitive experience. For this reason we think that he would be highly sympathetic to the views of those today who feel that ultimate difference between ethical systems are rationally irresolvable."

This speculation may have important implications for how we know, learn, teach and train in managerial ethics. For example, we could try to structure better combinations and balances of experiential learning with more abstract forms of classroom reasoning.

A common model of managerial ethics learning is the two step (1) study of ethical principles and (2) application of these ethical principles to management or some other area such as nursing or engineering. An alternative is a program where an "affective, experiential intuition" action model is followed. Such a model might be developed as follows. First, students and/or managers could be asked to recall and analyze past cases from their own lives and experiences where there were opportunities to reason and act in everyday managerial ethics situations. Second, students and managers could, in class, reflect upon their personal moral virtues/characters as subjective conditions and lenses for "ethical seeing" in these past personal cases. Third, students and professors could reflect upon their own and others' actual practice/praxis/actions in personal and/or ICCCH type cases as contexts for how human value revealed itself or not. Fourth, students' and or managers' "action characters", i.e., their "experiential intuition, based on, and directed to, individualized human actions" might be somewhat transformed toward "phronesis" by such simulated experiential action learning.

However, even if such speculations about learning, teaching, and "action character" are not provocative, the first three conclusions can still be considered. One, ethical reasoning as an effective action strategy is limited. Two, since ethical reasoning as an action strategy is limited, we need more research about and consideration of other action alternatives for influencing and changing ethical and unethical organization behaviors. As referred to above, other action alternatives include secretly blowing the whistle, publicly blowing the whistle, secretly threatening to blow the whistle, sabotage, quietly not implementing, conscientiously objecting, exiting, problem solving negotiating, and cooperative transformation (Nielsen, 1987). Third, understanding the limitations of ethical reasoning as an action strategy can lead to more effective ethical reasoning as an action strategy.

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